

St Botolph's Church Worthing
28 August 2016
Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16
Rev. Raymond Wood

Jesus – the same, always

This building of St Botolph's Church was started in 1873 and completed in 1879, but the remains of the ruined 13th-century church are still visible in the grounds east of this church. Just imagine what a different world that 13th-century was from what we see around us! If it were possible by some magic process to be transported back to the parish eight centuries ago, we would scarcely know whether to laugh or to cry. The buildings would certainly surprise us. The parish church would be just a tall, single bay, with narrow windows. The pace of life would surprise us, for fast speed was still measured by the ability of the horse.

And suppose the people eight centuries ago could be transported into 2016: they too would not know whether to laugh or cry. Imagine a lady of say, aged 20 years, in thick yarn clothing, meeting her counterpart of today in a short light skirt or a trouser suit. Imagine the astonishment, even terror, of seeing cars hurtling along some motorway, and the ear-shattering noise of jet aircraft or of a radio, to someone who has not even heard a gun fired. This world, this parish, has changed almost beyond recognition during the last eight centuries, so that we would feel lost if we returned to the old life, and they would feel lost in ours.

Yet one feature remains the same, so that by it the people both then and now could recognise their whereabouts; that is the church. Yes, structurally it would be different but its purpose is unchanged, proclaiming a faith also unchanged - "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and for ever", as our reading from the Letter to the Hebrews (13.8) proclaims.

As we look back to that world eight centuries ago, there was much ignorance, illness, and a weaker hold on life. Earlier, the Norman Conquest had ended provincial anarchy but at a fearful price, with a veritable desert of burnt villages and towns up and down the country as the Normans stamped out any revolt. The church was extremely powerful in authority and owned much land and estates. Nine-tenths of the people lived on the soil and many were slaves or serfs.

Eight centuries ago life as now was full of hopes and fears, of some things improved and others got worse. Of people loved and people hated; of aims achieved and plans frustrated. In a way it is true that the external aspect of life has completely changed, but substantially it has not changed at all. Pleasures and pain, joy and sorrow, success and failure, health and illness, life and death, are still the same as ever they were. The basic facts of life are the same, yesterday, today and we may suppose, forever.

So is the faith the church proclaims hopelessly out-dated? Can we say that it belongs to the past, only marginally to the present, and as some suggest probably not to the future at all? My answer is – No! We cannot make such statements on any kind of evidence. People are the same, life is basically the same, and their needs stand out as ever they did. What are those needs? The people need, as we all need, something in which to believe, a faith. After all, that is our trouble today. We do not, collectively, believe in anything or anybody. We are suspicious of top people: of bottom people: suspicious of capital, of labour. We are suspicious of governments, politicians, business tycoons and news media; and never more so than after the ‘weapons of mass destruction’ debacle with the 2003 invasion of Iraq; and to a lesser extent with the wild exaggerations during the recent Referendum on the European Union. We wonder whether we are being conned, cheated, and misled. When a people no longer believe in anything, the quality of its life drops.

What we all need today is a firm basis for living. We need a foothold across the shifting sands of life on to which to plant our feet. We have come to a point in history where we make change for the sake of change; not least in our banal liturgy. The all-but-shattering result is not refreshment but a dull, wearisome sameness. Go where you will in the world: to Worthing, Washington USA, or Western Europe: always the change is to identical skylines, the unending concrete and square windows. But changing cities, changing fashions, changing modes of shopping even, can only grant us satisfaction if under our feet is a firm foundation. Such as – ‘From where do we come?’ ‘Why are we here?’ ‘What is our destiny?’ Without answers to these basic questions, be they at best ‘faith’ answers, all our changes bring us discontent. People need a basis for living as they did eight centuries ago. We have not really changed.

We need a new belief in the worth of every individual. Mechanisation and industrialisation were unheard of eight centuries ago. In the last 140 years or more since this church was built, men and women who were craftsmen in the social community are now mere ‘hands’ in the factories and industries. Today there is an even more sinister style of conditioning of individuals, turning them into tools of other people. Where, by means of the television, they think the thoughts we must think, select the clothes we must wear, and even select the processed foods that we shall eat. So the electronic age is reducing people to a few keys punched out in some computer. Here then the church stands, proclaiming someone in whom we can believe, a foundation for our feet to stand upon in a time of overwhelming change who puts a value on the worth of every individual, regardless of colour, creed or class; namely Jesus Christ who has been unchanged for not just 800 years but over 2,000 years.

The keynote of this act of worship today should then be thanksgiving: for those benefactors who gave this building and endowed it and the other places of worship in this town; including the present generation who so recently vigorously stopped this church from being closed. Thanksgiving for all who have ministered within and without our walls - but above all thanksgiving for ‘Jesus Christ who is the same yesterday and today and for ever’. Everything derives from him. Everything is owed to him. To be a Christian is first and

last, to look to him. Let that be the focal point for our worship. For when this is the case the church is very strong, indeed the gates of hell cannot prevail against it, nor can those who would try to denigrate it – or to close it. So be proud of being part a Christian heritage of over 2,000 years.

AMEN

Reverend Raymond Wood

28.8.16